

JAMES HILLMAN ON ANIMALS:

A CORRESPONDENCE

Interviewed by John Stockwell



JS: You speak now of "ensouling the world." How does this relate to concerns that people have about the destruction of nature and the extinction of species, about cruelty to animals and killing them?

HILLMAN: According to prevailing Western (or Northern) consciousness, the world is merely matter, not alive, and without soul. What difference does it make what we do with everything that is not human--it is already dead. Strip-mining is good, according to this view, because it helps humans in whom the soul is exclusively located. So, you can see that the idea of anima mundi, as the soul in the world, upsets this prevailing attitude. Cosmology has to change, if you want to liberate animals from their Western predicament. And the first step in changing cosmology is returning the soul to the world, thereby releasing soul from entrapment in human subjectivism.

JS: What has polytheistic consciousness to do with this? Is there some relationship to a possible way of life that would retain room for the variety of species to survive?

HILLMAN: Support for variety is not the crucial aspect of polytheistic consciousness. After all, Noah's Ark also supported variety. More significant in this consciousness is that wherever you look into polytheistic religions--Egypt, Eskimo, India, Mesopotamia, tribal societies--you find that animals are divinities. Anything one does with them must be with their accord, else one is alienated from them (as we are). So, polytheistic consciousness implies religious respect for animals--all animals.

JS: A bioregionalist is a person who seeks to base his/her living upon the characteristics of the natural place, attempting to live here in this place, situated within a watershed, and that within a bioregion defined by its specific mix of fauna and flora and often

physiographically. A reinhabitant is even more concrete in this practice.

When I read your several pleasing essays on city life, taken from talks given for the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture and The Center for Civic Leadership in Dallas, I found in them much about which a bioregionalist or reinhabitant would be enthusiastic. It can be seen that were it possible to take an attitude toward the urban environment that would tend to ensoul, and then actually ensoul, those objects, the freeways and towers, and so on, that then a fundamental transformation of our attitude would be accomplished. It would be a transformation which would play back beneficially into our relationship with nature and other species. I wonder, however, whether to suggest this project does not in fact lend additional status to certain of the main sources of the destruction of nature, namely, those freeways and towers, with the result that the immense pressure they exert upon natural place is ratified rather than resisted and relieved. So much additional construction of towers going forward while we undertake the immense task of ensouling the massive constructed world might be thought to continue to entail concomitant destruction of nature. Would it not be better to resist such construction, if possible bring down much that has been constructed, and in cities to approach the ensouling of the world in relation to visions of the city at a more human scale?



PSYCHOLOGY

HILLMAN: Where I am in sympathy with both bioregionalism and reinhabitation as you have described them, we have to face a very simple fact: contemporary consciousness is thoroughly urbanized and technologized. Nature is no longer adequately imagined as the Great Mother who sustains us; instead, she has become a very fragile, endangered old lady, a senile case who has to be protected and preserved. The Twentieth Century seems to have ended the rule of Nature and replaced it with the rule of Technology. So, the issue today is double: both maintaining what we can of nature and extending the soul into technology. Here, I follow my friends Robert Sardello and Wolfgang Giegerich, who are attempting to re-vision the urban and the technological in terms of the Incarnation, the word becoming flesh, the flesh of the material world, actual things--from ashtrays and flush-toilets to the nuclear bomb. As long as the sacred and the soulful are exclusively and sentimentally limited to natural things, then all other things, like freeways and towers, become Satanic or soulless. This division will kill us; it is the old Christian division between the realm of Christ and that of Caesar. Every effort has to be made to face the realm of Caesar, the cities, and to re-think them in terms of the anima mundi which encompasses all things, constructed and natural. Once we can see with an animated eye and read buildings for their psychic import, and trust our eyes, we will not have such extreme opposition between urban and rural. It is not that freeways and towers as such are wrong, but the arrogance, paranoia, and speed which they embody. They merely concretize and exhibit massively those qualities of soul which appear as well in human beings and in natural objects. We need desperately not to harden the lines of confrontation between advocates--developers and conservers--but rather to soften the frontiers in our thinking about where the soul is located. Until we recognize soul in man-made things, and not only in snail-darters and whooping cranes, we condemn freeways and towers into being forever monsters without souls. So, of course they cannot help but have a deleterious effect on their environment and will continue to be erected as Satanic demonstrations.

JS: In several of your books, you have characterized the turn to the East, the return to the land, the return to the primitive, and the turn to animals as wrongly chosen directions. You say that these ways fail to re-



cognize that which is most alive and resourceful in our Western consciousness, namely, the archetypes/divine persons of first the Greek experience and then other Western experience still alive in our own. You add that in turning toward animals, there is a risk of barbaric animality. As I understand what you are saying, this is because the absence of imagination, of images, psyche, the imaginal, the failure to give their due to the divine persons who are alive in our experience as Western people is connected with the harm that we visit upon nature. We are like Ajax slaying animals, because we are not sufficiently imaginal.

Our idea, however, as advocates for animals, is to turn toward the animal through caring, through appreciation, through respect and reverence for other living species, even through a recognition of our shared identity with other species. We turn toward animals as toward others having rights. We turn as humans do to one another, in the common community. We also turn as a shapeshifter, exploring empathetically and imaginatively, and then ethically, this larger sense of kind. We return to animals, seeking to critique our present in terms of what we once were and, hopefully, will continue to be, even more so.

Will you comment?

HILLMAN; When I made those remarks against

returning to animality, I meant only one thing: our becoming non-verbal, grunting goofs--"Animal House." I was using the term "animality" in the usual, insulting sense: dumb, brute, wild. I was addressing that style of simplistic therapy that has given up on language as expression of soul and calls crawling and screaming "reconnection with the animal body." When patients are urged to wriggle like a snake or hug like a bear, they are encouraged to be as ugly and violent as only humans can be. These therapies do not notice the beauty of actual animals and that reconnecting to the animal means getting to a more sensitive, more artful and humorous place in the psyche. Thus, these therapies I was condemning, in the name of finding the animal soul, actually re-enact our Western tradition's contempt.

Besides, giving up on language betrays our own human nature. I think that the human form of display, in the ethologist's sense of "display," is rhetoric. Our ability to sing, speak, tell tales, recite, orate is essential to our love-making, boasting, fear-inspiring, territory-protecting, surrendering, and off-spring-guarding behaviors. Giraffes and tigers have splendid coats; we have splendid speech. Returning to animality, in your sense of "animal," I therefore heartily endorse, as you know, for instance, from my recent seminars with Gary Snyder, Gioia Timpanelli, and Robert Bly, and also from my lectures on the subject going back to the sixties, all of which have been aimed at evoking the animal as psychic presence. I have been trying to foster self-recognition of human being as animal being.

JS: Bioregionalists and reinhabitants have noticed that indigenous peoples, who resided in their natural region usually for a long time, had become shaped by their place into people whose relationships with the natural world were respectful and more reciprocal than we find ours to be. Immigrants, most of us, by contrast, were shaped physiographically elsewhere than where we now are. Our escalating assault on nature derives from our being transients, from our being in a place we do not recognize, and from the compensative efforts we make to live as if we were in that other place we came from. We modify the geography here which we do not recognize, try to shape it like the old, or simply root it up or pave it over, so that at least we can fantasize the old defensively against the earth voices of a place unfamiliar

to us. Reinhabitants seek instead to recognize place as this place, with its specific character, seek to live here. The animals, plants, rocks, and waters of this place are specific. Considering now San Francisco Bay, the life of indigenous people in this place, under its influence, shaped by it, gave rise to divine persons, Kuxsu and possibly Coyote among them, who are exquisitely appropriate to nature and the potentialities of human life here. Attempting to approach these local figures through study and through the imitation or even enactment of the rituals of peoples for whom these figures were alive, is one way of tuning in to the actual nature of this place, of learning to see, even to see through the pavement. They are figures of regulation, offering the suggestion of limits within which to live.

Acquaintance with these local persons is held by reinhabitants to be a highly important factor in contending with those forces which are destroying this place. The recommendation to turn away from the attempt to become acquainted with these figures appears to recommend giving up this means of finding out where we are. Ajax, slayer of animals, mistook the scene. Hercules does not appropriately relate to where he arrives, in the Underworld. It would be held that Dionysus, for example, is disoriented in Shasta (northern California), though perhaps less so than Ajax, and offers not much contact with the actual place. By knowing him one rather knows Greece, which is just the trouble, for the Greeks and other figures of the immigrant traditions are perhaps present as pioneers and forty-niners too, even if we can agree that the eternal nature of a god does not permit him to be other than his character, though it be changeable, indicates, no matter where he is.

By attending to the persons of Western consciousness, it would seem, what one gets are visions of the City on the Hill (San Francisco) or the Athens of the West (Berkeley). But are these notions sufficiently ecological to remain humane? At the very least, the persons of our Western imagination would seem to be well advised to themselves become reinhabitants through acquaintance with the ancient figures of this place. Being precise in their mythic structures, however, can they be so polytheistic?

HILLMAN: "To see through the pavement"--what a lovely metaphor! Who could be against it?

Yet, I hear the voice of Gaia in your question. You see, from the perspective of an archetypal psychology, every position presents the voice of a "God," an imaginative trope that governs the viewpoint. The emphasis on geography and physiography, on earth, plants, rocks, etc., seems to bespeak the perspective of Gaia (who today is tending to replace old Jahweh with a new and fanatical monotheistic consciousness). The danger of this perspective--which is, nonetheless, very appealing--is that it, too, becomes a literalism; i.e., Dionysus has meaning only in Greece, whereas if you live in the Pacific Northwest, you must see through the literal pavement into the literal Native American myths and styles, for they once literally inhabited that soil. Reinhabiting could become a kind of imitatio Christi transferred to an imitation of pre-white culture.

I do not want to offend you, or Gaia, or the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest, or those who follow the path of reinhabitation. Yet, psychologically, wherever we move, we immigrants, we sons and daughters of Europe, mainly, speaking English with its



roots in Northern Europe and Latin and Greek, with our civilization's customs, dogmas, and laws, and our Bible, we see through the pavement only according to our own tradition. Our eyeballs and ears were made in Palestine and Athens, in Rome, Florence, and London--even if we study Zen, change our name into

Sanskrit, or chant native American songs. Because of our background, we can never hear the rocks speak without the distortions we bring with our hearing, in our unconscious baggage. My task has been to unpack the immigrants' trunks, to insist that the settlers look at what they are transporting with them from Palestine and Rome in their attitudes in which lies history. Dionysus and Gaia, and especially Christianity, continue to affect what we Americans do and say. Anyway, even if I am all wrong, doesn't it take centuries for a settler to hear the earth of a place, to become soil-soaked?

JS: In your essay entitled "The Animal Kingdom in the Human Dream" (Eranos Yearbook, 1982), you write, movingly:

We know the record of extermination. The animal kingdom from the caveman through Darwin on the Galapagos and Melville on the whaler is no more. Insecticides lie on the leaves. In the green hills of Africa the bull elephants are brought to their knees for their tusks. We long for an ecological restoration of the kingdom that is impossible. (emphasis added)

Please elaborate. Is the protection of nature a lost cause? But we and nature live on in dream and imagination?

HILLMAN: The protection of nature is noble; so, it isn't a lost cause. It is an act of devotion to Gaia, let us say--and also to Dionysus, who was called "zoe", or life. However, whether nature, in the Romantic sense of Wordsworth and Rousseau and the Hudson River school of painting, can continue--that I surely do not know. I do think that "nature" is already pretty well gone, except in our sentimental nostalgia. "Nature" seems to be under a two-pronged attack. We can distinguish between the attack on actual soil and wetlands, actual species and forests, and the attack on the Romantic idea of nature as locus of Beauty, as God's veil, or as a nourishing Mother. I think we can protect plants and soil without having to subscribe to the Romantic idealization of nature. And, I think we can protect plants and soil, etc., without being moralistic--our Duty, their Rights, our Guilt over ancient abuses, . . . Reasons for this protective work? I can suggest three:

- a) it is a devotion;
- b) it is practical common sense to maintain the eon-old biosphere;
- c) it extends the idea of soul, and the experience of animation, from our subjective personalism, so that the individual human is less isolated and sick.

Of course, protecting plants and soil, etc., is also probably good for the plants and the soil—but I am confining myself to reasons why self-centered Western humans might support this protective work.

JS: In that same essay, "The Animal Kingdom in the Human Dream," you write of an "aesthetic and ecological perception" visited by events constituting a "momentary restoration of Eden," and that for "that short eternal while" there is "an original co-presence of human and animal." How do you see the image of the Peaceable Kingdom? To which divine person or persons does this image belong?

HILLMAN: Could you move the "Peaceable Kingdom" from a utopian ideal, from becoming a project (which requires "execution" and must be achieved by will power) to a psychological experience readily available?

My phrase, "that short eternal while" in which there is "an original co-presence of human and animal" bespeaks an experience anyone can have when playing with a cat, when close to a horse's breathing, when hearing a bird call. An extraordinary chord of communion, which, I believe, must also be sensed by the animal, maybe even the bird. The contemporary infatuation with the new Animal Pioneers (Jane Goodall, the Kalahari couple, and the observers of elephants, tigers, wolves, etc.) invites anyone to that psychological experience of the Peaceable Kingdom. It occurs most frequently, however, right at home, in bed, dreaming. And I believe, too, that this sort of experience gives us a very ancient sense of the animal as a divinity.

JS: How do you view the activity and thinking of the animal rights/liberation movement? Could you recommend directions the movement might profitably take?

HILLMAN: I must decline saying anything specific about the animal rights movement, because I don't know enough. I'm generally leery of programs and movements wherever they tend to obscure psychological insight. (Christianity is a good example of an excel-

lent program that results in psychological unconsciousness regarding the program's own shadow.) However, the idea of Rights is too Lockean, too secular and legalistic. It seems like another anthropomorphism—imagining animals as underprivileged people who must be included in the social contract. Perhaps they want to be; I just don't know. Does anyone? However, if the cosmology shifts and we imagine them ensouled, if our perception shifts and we see their beauty, if our humanism shifts and we recognize our own inflation, then the dignity that rights would grant to animals would already have been restored. I prefer to go at this issue, not by extending our humanistic constitutional rights, but by re-visioning secular humanism itself.

JS: If you were asking yourself questions about our relationship with animals, what question would you consider was the most important? What answers would you initially propose?

HILLMAN: My answer will probably surprise you, and even disappoint you. Most important is bettering the human/animal relation in dreams. Everything comes to a head there: our derogatory Cartesian-Christianism, our meat addiction, our insecticides; all our alienation from animals and arrogance toward them show up nightly in dreams where animals are feared, attacked, eradicated—so that the ego can awaken in the morning as a self-centered hero ready to enter the campaign of its daily business. Hercules, slayer of animals. I have found people with the strongest sympathy toward animal causes still acting as animal terrorists in their dreams. A change in consciousness may also begin in dreams, when the dreamer allows the fierce black dog to approach or the snake's fang to pierce his or her skin. And, a great emotion is released, a transformative recognition, upon dreaming of a skinned pony, a drowned bird, a fish lying belly up. When these images are taken deeply to heart—as something going on right inside my own psyche, my soul—the rest follows. I haven't even mentioned the marvelous dream animals that come to teach the dream ego, or save it, or impress it with beauty and power.

